This isn't a man's world: women in business

By Lucy Desai

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Earlier in March the world celebrated International Women's Day, which focuses on forging a gender-equal world, celebrating women's successes, and raising awareness of historic and present bias.

Source: pixabay.com

In recent times, there's a lot of discussion around women in the workplace and underrepresentation in industry - 5% of US ownership in the tech industry is women, and only 2.9% of black women study STEM-related bachelor's degrees across the world.

This begs the question, what about women in business?

It seems that more women are turning to business than ever before. Surprisingly, when considering statistics across other international industries, the global number of female entrepreneurs has grown over 10% each year.

According to Karen Quintos, chief customer officer at Dell, women are equally as likely or more likely to start a business than men.

But do the reasons for this reflect general bias and inequality for those not self-employed in comparison to their male counterparts?

According to a 2018 report, reasons included the fact that women are often primary caregivers and need more flexibility for either their young children or ageing parents, to charge their own rates and handle their own online accounting in order to overcome the gender pay gap, and to escape the glass ceiling that is having promotions passed over them in favour of male colleagues.

African businesswomen

If we were asked to guess which country had the highest proportion of female business leaders, we'd likely guess that it would be a progressive Scandinavian country like Denmark or Norway.

In actual fact, Ghana, West Africa, is the highest, with women owning 46.4% of all businesses in 2018.

According to reports from the World Bank, Africa is among one of the highest regions for female entrepreneurs in the world at 27%, followed closely by Europe at 24%, and Asia Pacific at 13%.

However, at the bottom of the continent, South African women remain in the minority for female business leaders — over half of the South African population are women, yet only 18.8% of businesses are owned by women, unaligned with the global rates.

Why the gender gap?

Firstly, an exploration into women in business in Africa found that most women and young people in South Africa are unemployed and living in poverty, therefore some are compelled into choosing business as their career, forcing them to become self-employed in microenterprise projects such as chicken farming or sewing.

Secondly, research has found that women struggle to gain funding from banks for their business ideas, with the financing gap for women in Sub-Saharan Africa being more than $20 billion.

Thirdly, a huge number of South African women underestimate their abilities due to the way they've been socialised about attitudes to gender. Through bias in education and societal expectations, women haven't been raised to be leaders, are often perceived negatively when assertive, and have internalised low confidence and fear of failure. South Africa is home to the biggest gender gap in regard to favourable media coverage, which is highly influential over opinions and perceptions of entrepreneurship.

What we want

When women are successful in business, it drives economic growth. A study by Development Economics forecasted that female-owned businesses in South Africa could help yield over R175 billion a year for the economy in 2022 while simultaneously providing 972,000 jobs.

It's becoming important for successful women to be able to tell their story to give budding entrepreneurs someone to look up to and aspire to be like, particularly in male-dominated sectors, through education reform. Education reform has been effective in encouraging girls in UK schools to pursue STEM-related subjects, with A-level material including successful women in the industry, which was linked to 2019's influx of female students. Is this something South Africa needs?

There are initiatives that have been created to encourage female business owners and the economic advancement of women in developing countries.

Funding that can help women in business

Deloitte Women's Mentorship Programme helps women break down barriers by hosting events, attracting and retaining talented women while providing a platform for likeminded women to connect and seek advice and further mentoring - the more women in business, the less discrimination.

Similarly, the Isivande Women's Fund (IWF) is a government fund aimed at driving women's economic empowerment with finance, helping improve the success of a business - R400 million has been used to help women in business, so take advantage!

In a challenging economic landscape, it's important to help create jobs and support each other in our goals - striving for gender equality is an important steppingstone.

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